

CLAIMS

1. A process for completing a contractual agreement over a wide-area network for purchasing a product having multiple configurations characterized by a set of product attributes and exclusively sold by manufacturer-licensed sellers, comprising:

(a) configuring a customer's desired product by selecting the customer's desired set of product attributes to form a request for quote (RFQ), wherein the desired set of product attributes comprises a plurality of product configuration characterization parameters;

(b) selecting a target set of manufacturer-licensed sellers located within a geographical area, wherein the target set sellers comprises at least one manufacturer-licensed seller;

(c) transmitting the RFQ to the target set of sellers using the wide-area network;

(d) responding to the RFQ with a price quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers, wherein the price quote is transmitted using the wide-area network to the customer;

(e) selecting a price quote for acceptance by the customer; and

(f) transmitting the customer's acceptance to the seller.

2. The process of claim 1 wherein step a further comprises:

(i) transmitting the customer's desired set of product attributes to an intermediary;

(ii) inputting the customer's desired set of product attributes into an intermediary subsystem; and

(iii) querying an electronic database of existing product configurations, using the customer's desired set of product attributes, to assess the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration.

3. The process of claim 2 further comprising (iv) transmitting the customer's desired set of product attributes to a second intermediary.

4. The process of claim 1 wherein step a further comprises:

(i) inputting the customer's product attributes into a computer through a customer subsystem;

(ii) querying an electronic database of existing product configurations, using the customer's desired set of product attributes, to assess the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration; and

(iii) transmitting the customer's attribute set to an intermediary.

5. The process of claim 4 further comprising (iv) transmitting the customer's desired set of attributes to a second intermediary.

6. The process of claim 1 in step a, further comprising the step ranking at least one product attribute in the set of product attributes on a scale that indicates the customer's degree of flexibility about that product attribute.

7. The process of claim 1 wherein step d further comprises:
 - (i) querying an electronic database of existing product configurations to provide a feasible alternative product configuration; and
 - (ii) assembling a quote based upon the alternative product configuration.
8. The process of claim 1 wherein step c further comprises:
 - (i) transmitting the RFQ from an intermediary to a server; and
 - (ii) transmitting the RFQ from the server to the target set of sellers.
9. The process of claim 1 wherein step c further comprises:
 - (i) transmitting the RFQ from an intermediary to a foreign server;
 - (ii) transmitting the RFQ from the foreign server to a server; and
 - (iii) transmitting the RFQ from the server to a target set of sellers.
10. The process of claim 9 wherein the RFQ is stored on the server and foreign server, and transmitted between the server and foreign server, using a standardized data format.
11. The process of claim 1 wherein responding to the RFQ comprises:
transmitting a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers to a server; and
transmitting the quote from the server to an intermediary.
12. The process of claim 1 wherein step d further comprises:
 - (i) transmitting a price quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers to a server;
 - (ii) transmitting the price quote from the server to a foreign server; and
 - (iii) transmitting the price quote from the foreign server to an intermediary.
13. The process of claim 12 wherein the price quote is stored on the server and the foreign server and transmitted between the server and the foreign server using a standardized data format.
14. The process of claim 1 where the price quotes are transmitted to the customer by the intermediary using a telephone, electronic mail, or fax.
15. The process of claim 1 wherein step b further comprises:
 - (i) querying a database of product sellers based on a set of seller criteria; and
 - (ii) selecting the target set of product sellers from the query results.
16. The process of claim 15 further comprising storing a list of the target set of sellers on the seller database as a preferred seller list.
17. The process of claim 15 wherein step b further comprises (iii) filtering the query result based on additional seller criteria.
18. The process of claim 1 wherein step e further comprises:
 - (i) transmitting the price quotes to an intermediary subsystem; and

(ii) transmitting the price quotes to a customer subsystem.

19. The process of claim 1 further comprising notifying the target set of sellers that an RFQ has been transmitted to them.

20. The process of claim 1 further comprising storing each RFQ in an RFQ database.

21. The process of claim 20 further comprising tracking the status of each RFQ.

22. The process of claim 1 further comprising:

(i) inputting a set of customer information; and

(ii) storing the set of customer information in a customer database.

23. The process of claim 22 further comprising tracking customer information to obtain marketing information.

24. A computer network apparatus for facilitating purchase of a product, wherein the product has multiple configurations, is sold by manufacturer-licensed sellers and having multiple configurations characterized by a set of product attributes, comprising:

(a) a server comprising a processor and a storage device connected to the processor,

(b) a product database stored on the storage device, wherein the product database consists essentially of information regarding existing combinations of product attributes,

(c) a seller database stored on the storage device, the seller database including seller information such as geographic location,

(d) a program stored on the storage device for controlling the processor, wherein (1) the program is operative with the processor to receive a customer's selected set of product attributes, (2) query the product database using the customer's desired set of product attributes to confirm the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration, (3) query the seller database using a set of seller attributes to select a target set of sellers in the customer's geographic area, (4) transmit a request for quote (RFQ) to the target set of sellers, (5) the RFQ including the customer's desired set of product attributes, receive a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers, (6) transmit the quote to the customer, (7) receive an acceptance of one of the quotes, and (8) transmit the acceptance to the seller whose quote was accepted.

25. The apparatus of claim 24 further comprising a seller subsystem connected to the server, wherein the seller subsystem comprises a computer operative with a program stored thereon programmed to:

receive from the server an RFQ;

receive from a seller input of a quote in response to the RFQ, and

transmit the quote to the server.

26. The apparatus of claim 25 further comprising an intermediary subsystem connected to the server, the intermediary subsystem comprising a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from an intermediary input of a customer's selected set of product attributes,
transmit to the server the customer's selected set of product attributes,
receive from the server a quote from a seller,
receive from the intermediary input of an acceptance of a quote, and
transmit to the server an acceptance of one of the quotes.

27. The apparatus of claim 25 further comprising a customer subsystem connected to the server, wherein the customer subsystem comprises a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from a customer input of the customer's selected set of product attributes; and
transmit the selected set of product attributes to the server.

28. The apparatus of claim 26 further comprising a customer subsystem, wherein the customer subsystem comprises a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from a customer input of the customer's selected set of product attributes; and
transmit the selected set of product attributes to the server.

29. The apparatus of claim 26 wherein the intermediary subsystem is further operative with the program stored thereon to receive from the server a customer's desired set of configuration attributes.

30. The apparatus of claim 26 wherein the intermediary subsystem comprises a computer having a program and a second product database stored thereon, wherein the program is operative with the computer to:

receive input of a customer's selected set of product attributes;
query the second product database using the customer's desired set of product attributes to confirm the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration, and
transmit to the server the customer's desired set of product attributes.

31. The apparatus of claim 24 further comprising an RFQ database stored on the server's storage device, wherein the program stored on the server's storage device is operative with the processor to:

store RFQ's processed by the apparatus in the RFQ database, and
track the status of each RFQ in the database.

32. The apparatus of claim 24 further comprising a customer database stored on the storage device, wherein the program is operative with the processor to:

store customer information in the customer database, and

update the customer information when new customer information is received.

33. The apparatus of claim 32 wherein the customer information is stored on the customer database in lists, wherein each list is an intermediary's customer list.

34. The apparatus of claim 32 wherein the program is further operative with the processor to track customer information.

35. The apparatus of claim 24 wherein the program stored on the storage device of the server is further operative to store a list of target sellers as a preferred seller list.

36. A computer network apparatus for facilitating customer purchase of a product having multiple configurations, sold by manufacturer-licensed sellers and having configurations characterized by a set of product attributes, comprising:

(a) a server comprising a processor, a storage device connected to the processor, a product database stored on the storage device, wherein the product database includes information regarding existing combinations of product attributes, and a seller database stored on the storage device, wherein the seller database including seller characterizing information,

(b) a program stored on the storage device for controlling the processor, wherein the program is operative with the processor to (1) receive a request for quote (RFQ) from a foreign server, wherein the RFQ consists essentially of a customer's selected set of product attributes, and communicated in a common language for describing the product, (2) query the seller database using a set of seller attributes to select a target set of sellers in the customer's geographic area, (3) transmit the RFQ to the target set of sellers using the common language, (4) receive a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers, (5) transmit the quote to the foreign server, (6) receive an acceptance of one of the quotes from the foreign server, and (7) transmit the acceptance to the seller whose quote was accepted.

37. The computer network apparatus of claim 36 further comprising a foreign server connected to the server, the foreign server comprising a computer operative with a program stored to (1) receive a customer's selected set of product attributes, (2) configure a product using the customer's set of product attributes, (3) transmit a request for quote (RFQ) to the server, wherein the RFQ consists essentially of the customer's set of product attributes in a standardized data format, (4) receive a quote from the server, (5) transmit the quote to an intermediary, (6) receive an acceptance of the quote from the intermediary, and (7) transmit an acceptance to the server.

38. The apparatus of claim 36 further comprising a seller subsystem connected to the server, wherein the seller subsystem comprises a computer operative with a program stored to:
receive an RFQ from the server;
receive from a seller input of a quote in response to the RFQ, and
transmit the quote to the server.

47. The apparatus of claim 36 wherein the program stored on the storage device of the server is further operative to store a list of target sellers as a preferred seller list.

48. A vehicle description language for storing a description of a vehicle in a first and a second computer memories and for transmitting the description of the vehicle between the first and second computer memories via a computer network, wherein the vehicle description language is created in a hierarchical data structure, comprising:

(a) a public block of data, having starting and ending delimiters that identify the beginning and end of the block of data, wherein the public block of data comprises:

(i) a vehicle identification sub-block hierarchically nested in the public block of data and comprising a plurality of data items wherein the data items are selected from the group consisting of manufacturer, model, model year and style of the vehicle,

(ii) a vehicle detail sub-block hierarchically nested in the public block of data , wherein the vehicle detail sub-block comprises:

(1) a standard sub-block hierarchically nested in the vehicle detail sub-block and comprising a plurality of standard categories, wherein each standard category is hierarchically nested in the standard sub-block and comprises a plurality of data items relating to standard equipment available on a vehicle, and

(2) an option sub-block hierarchically nested in the vehicle detail sub-block and comprising a plurality of option categories, wherein each option category is hierarchically nested in the option sub-block and comprises a plurality of data items relating to a particular category of optional equipment desired on a particular vehicle; and

(ii) a private block of data comprising a plurality of data items relating to the customer who is ordering the vehicle.

49. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein each sub-block contains a starting delimiter and an ending delimiter, wherein the starting delimiter identifies the block or sub-block within which the sub-block is nested.

50. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein each category consists essentially of a starting delimiter and an ending delimiter identifying the sub-block within which the category is nested.

51. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein each data item consists essentially of a starting delimiter and an ending delimiters identifying the block, sub-block or category within which the data item is nested.

52. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein the standard categories are selected from the group consisting of comprise exterior, interior, mechanical, safety, fuel mileage rating, and combinations thereof.

53. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein the option categories are selected from the group consisting of emissions, engine, transmission, preferred equipment groups, appearance package, tires, seat type, seat trim, paint, additional options, and combinations thereof.

54. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein the public block further comprises a color sub-block nested within the public block, wherein the color sub block having nested therein categories comprises color selections and color combinations.

55. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein the data items in the private block comprise the customer's name, address and phone number.

56. The vehicle description language of claim 48 wherein the language is implemented with Extensible Markup Language (XML).

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